

Acquisition of Japanese Vocabulary by Chinese Background Learners: The
Roles of Transfer in the Productive and Receptive Acquisition of Cognates
and Polysemy

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Abstract

As is widely known, Japanese and Chinese not only share the common logographic orthography called “kanji” or “hanzi” respectively, but also share a number of kanji compounds as cognates, many of which share the same or similar meaning. The major objective of this dissertation is to investigate the roles of transfer and the difficulty in Chinese background learners’ (CBLs’) use and acquisition of Japanese kanji compounds and kanji words. In particular, under what condition and how do CBLs transfer Chinese words into Japanese counterparts is investigated.

The results of a lexicality judgement test, an oral production test, and a translation test showed that acquisition of partially deceptive cognates, which share the same orthography with partly the same and partly different meanings, was often prolonged. It was also found that the difficulty of acquisition of partially deceptive cognates varied according to their cross-linguistic semantic condition and task type. In the oral production test, CBLs frequently used L1 words by adapting them into L2 phonology both successfully and unsuccessfully when they had no prior knowledge of the L2 counterparts. In addition, negative transfer was detected even when CBLs had a correct knowledge of the L2 word. The results of the translation test revealed that CBLs are liable to misinterpret the meaning of partially deceptive cognates when one of their meanings happens to make sense within the context. Additionally, it is suggested that CBLs might create different types of interlanguage depending upon the cross-linguistic semantic condition and relative frequency of the L2 input for each meaning of the partially deceptive cognates.

The transferability of polysemy was found to be constrained by prototype condition, learners' existing L2 knowledge, and task type. While transferability correlated well with the perceived prototypicality of the L1 items in CBLs' oral production, transfer was also at work for the less prototypical items in their comprehension task. The findings indicate that the transferability of Chinese words into their Japanese counterparts is constrained by multiple factors. Further, both positive and negative transfer influence CBLs' production, comprehension, and interlanguage construction of Japanese vocabulary in a complex manner.

Keyword : vocabulary acquisition, cognates, language transfer